



“A Healthy Diet”

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1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Have you ever seen chili used as face paint? If not, then you haven't been around a baby learning to eat solid foods. I remember when both our girls were transitioning from milk to mushy foods, our dinnertime routine became a lot more chaotic. Every night the dining room looked as if a four-course meal was blasted out of a blender at high speed. Annaleigh and Bea would need sink baths, their highchairs would need a hose down in the back yard, and the floors would always need a visit from Mr. Clean. Food went anywhere other than in their mouths. Amanda and I would find hummus in their hair, avocado up their noses, and yogurt in their ears. If nutrition was gained through skin absorption, our girls would've definitely gotten a healthy diet as babies.

For babies, moving from milk to solid foods is a natural process that often takes quite a bit of time. It can also be very frustrating and more than a little messy as the mashed sweet potatoes and squished bananas are hurled like sticky spitballs. Moving from an infancy stage to a more mature phase of life is hard work. We must water and work, strain and strive, prune, plow, and plant. But the growth, ultimately, is given by God. There is nothing that we can grow on our own. There's nothing we can force into growing. All growth comes from God's gardening hands. But the Corinthians in today's Scripture reading didn't understand this. Even after five years of spiritual food from Paul, the Corinthian church was still childish in its spiritual diet and attitude.

The Corinthian church was divided because they had divided loyalties. Some of them were loyal to Paul and others were loyal to Apollos and the two groups didn't want to associate with one another. According to Paul, there was jealousy and fighting among them. It was clear that the church at Corinth was not consuming healthy spiritual food and was becoming a broken body. Paul continually emphasized to the Corinthians a healthy diet grounded in God's message of Jesus. Jesus should have been the main ingredient. Only two more verses in his letter, chapter 3 verse 11, Paul goes on to say, “No one can lay any other foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

The Corinthian community has taken out of their menu the main ingredient of Jesus. And because of that, we find a Corinthian church that has put their allegiance in Paul or Apollos, planters and irrigators of the field, but not the one who can make it grow. The church is a broken body. We see that this theme—division and brokenness—is significant in the entire letter to the Corinthians and Paul wants them to grow up and be united. Paul isn't worried about dogma, doctrines, or declarations. He isn't worried about reserved pews, liturgical worship, or screens in the sanctuary. He isn't worried about whether God is omniscient, omnipresent, or omnipotent. No, Paul is concerned with the Corinthian community, their communion with Jesus and each other, with their unity.

Paul desires that the people of Corinth be healthy and growing followers of Jesus, but if the salvation for which they hope is simply their own salvation, in isolation from those around them—especially those with whom they disagree—then they have strayed from a healthy spiritual diet and have eaten junk food that poisons their love for one another. Paul understands that there is no reconciliation to God without reconciliation to other people; there is no union with God without unity with one another; there is no love of God without love for each other. Paul understands that spiritual maturity for the Corinthian church has little to do with theology, but has everything to do with the way that people treat one another.

Indeed, for the apostle Paul being healthy Christ followers is nothing less than a new humanity made in the image of Christ, from which no one is excluded. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is only in this peace offered in Christ that we are weaned from simple milk and grow our diet to expand our tribes and boundaries, that our differences are of no significance, and that we are truly free to be ourselves, in all our uniqueness, without fear, or hatred, or bullying, or pressure to conform.

And when we understand that this is what salvation in Christ means, then we can understand why Paul was so upset about the division in the church at Corinth: when they say “I am of Paul” or “I am of Apollos,” they are denying the inclusive gospel of Jesus, they are denying that God has come to us so that ALL may have life and have it abundantly. If the Corinthian church can find no peace; if those who think like Paul can’t get along with those who think like Apollos; if bickering and jealousy replace understanding and sharing, then truly they are still childish and “merely human.” And this is exactly why Paul says to the Corinthians that he cannot address them as “spiritual people,” but he can only address them instead as “people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.” That Paul would tell the church that they are “people of the flesh,” and that they are “merely human” clarifies the severity of the situation. The division of the church in Corinth is the lack of a healthy spiritual diet where Jesus is the main ingredient.

Without the humbling, self-sacrificing, compassionate way of Christ as the main ingredient in our spiritual diet, we as church and as a people of God will always be divided. We, as a human race, are always tempted to associate ourselves with a charismatic leader, a political preacher, or a bullying blowhard. We seem to find only named communities where we can keep people out. “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” “I am of Jesus,” or “I am of Muhammed,” “I am conservative,” or “I am liberal,” “I am pro-life,” or “I am pro-choice,” “I am for safety,” or “I am for immigrants.” We are a world of milk-fed spiritual infants not ready for solid foods. We need to spiritually grow up.

In our society, where truth claims are becoming more and more suspect and fake news and fanaticized Christians divide God’s people, the only way that we may make any claim about the truthfulness of the gospel is for us to enact it. If we are to have an effective witness in our world, there is only one way: we must demonstrate the truth of the gospel through the authentic and loving life of our communities. In our war-torn and hate-filled world, the announcement that God has reconciled us to Godself and to one another is only true if it is a reality in our lives.

Paul reminds the church at Corinth that they are “God’s field, God’s building.” And later in the letter he pens his most famous metaphor for the church about the Body of Christ. He reminds the people that they themselves are Christ’s body, and are members of one another. He reminds them that the cup of salvation they bless is a sharing in the blood of Christ, that the consecrated bread they break is a sharing in the body of Christ, and that “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

The Corinthian church did not need to become a fractured, broken body, because Christ’s body was already broken so that they could be whole. Paul reminded them that Christ suffered violence so that they could wage peace, not war. Paul reminded them that Christ was hated so that they could love and be loved. Paul reminded them that God’s mercy is greater than their judgment and that God’s grace is greater than their impatience and that God’s love cannot be conquered. And though we build walls to separate ourselves from one another, those walls are broken down in the broken body of Jesus. Though we draw battle lines to defeat one another, those lines are erased in the forgiveness of Jesus. Though we use hurtful and damaging words to bully others and benefit ourselves, those words are transformed into acts of love, humility, and justice. Though we are divided by political party or race or nationality or thoughts or family groups, the waters of baptism are thicker than blood and the bread and wine nourish all.

I hope we remember that the process of maturing in our faith can be a messy business just as the process of introducing solid food to an infant’s life can be fraught with problems. But we need to do it. We cannot remain infants in Christ. We must eventually get the avocados out of our noses and the yogurt out of our ears. We need to plant and water and allow God to grow us into healthy, hearty, faith-filled followers seeking to build rich and inclusive communities. Because in our churches and in our world, where it is all too easy to resort to being “merely human,” we are called to be people of the Spirit. And of this Spirit, we are born, we consume a healthy diet, by grace we grow, and we are charged to be God’s servants, working together for good.

Amen.